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ABSTRACT

This handbook has been written to address issues such as how to organize an effective parent group, how to develop a plan of action that gets results, how to deal effectively with school officials, how to make a parent organization work, and how to develop leadership, plan meetings, use funds, and find resources. It is directed toward parents who are concerned about their children's education and about the environment in which that education takes place, and who have organized--or would like to organize--a parents' group that can make a positive contribution toward improving conditions at their children's school. The focus of this handbook is the smallest unit of parent organization--the parent group at a school. This focus was chosen because it deals with the issue that strikes closest to home for every parent--his or her own children's schooling--and because the local school group is the basic unit on which citywide and statewide parent organizations are built. (Author/IRT)

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PARENTS ORGANIZING TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS

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A PARENTS' NETWORK
Publication of
THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CITIZENS IN EDUCATION
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PREFACE

Happy Fernandez is the author of "Parents Organizing to Improve Schools." Her belief that parents possess talent and dedication which should be tapped and developed in improving the quality of education which children receive convinced us that she was the person to write a basic handbook for parents. We admire what she has produced and with pride add this handbook to the growing list of NCCE publications planned and developed for parents and citizens.

With three boys in the Philadelphia public schools, Happy Fernandez has provided leadership in and worked with other parents to establish several parent organizations including the Parents Union for Public Schools in Philadelphia (a city-wide, independent, action-oriented parents organization), the Powelton Mantua Educational Fund (a neighborhood based community organization working for better public schools), and the Children's School (an alternative public school for children ages 3-8). She is presently the eastern field representative for NCCE's Citizen Training Institutes. She also teaches in the Child Care Department at Temple University.

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CITIZENS IN EDUCATION

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The manuscript for this handbook was carefully read by members of 29 local level parent/citizen organizations dedicated to improving the quality of public education which their children receive. Other persons carefully read the material from the varying backgrounds of educator, board member, and parents of children beyond school age. Ms. Fernandez received many comments, criticisms, suggestions for changes and remarks of praise for sections felt to be of particular help. All comments were carefully reviewed and many are now a part of this handbook. We are indebted to each of the following for their time, talent and counsel:

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For the errors, omissions and oversights which are part of even the most dedicated efforts, the author and NCCE assume responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Do you want to know how to organize an effective parent group? How to develop a plan of action that gets results? How to deal effectively with school officials? How to make a parent organization work? How to develop leadership, plan meetings, use funds and find resources?

It is to answer these questions—and many others—that this handbook has been written. It is directed towards parents who are concerned about their children's education and about the environment in which that education takes place, and who have organized—or would like to organize—a *parents'* group that can make a positive contribution towards improving conditions at their children's schools.

Parents *do* have *rights* in the education of their children—and not only human rights, but legal rights, as well. And, by their own activity, parents can do much to enforce and extend these rights at the schools their children attend.

The focus of this handbook is the smallest unit of parent organization—*the parent group at a school*. We have chosen this focus for two reasons: because it deals with the issue that strikes closest to home for every parent—his or her own children's schooling; and because the local school group is the basic unit on which city-wide and state-wide parent organizations are built.

Parents who want the local group to be effective may have to start organizing from the ground up; their school may have no parent group. They may have to revitalize a parent group that has become lifeless. Or they may have to work to redirect the energies of the existing parent organization.

Whatever the specific situation or needs, this handbook should be helpful. It is based on techniques and approaches that *have worked*—and are working—in communities throughout the country

and in schools from kindergarten through high school, and that are effective in dealing with a wide variety of very different kinds of problems and circumstances.

The question and answer format we have used is designed to make the handbook easier to work with. It enables you to go directly to the section that speaks to the particular problem that concerns you at any given time. You'll find some very specific suggestions and checklists; you'll also find some general guidelines. So pick out pieces that are useful. Adapt ideas to fit your situation. Don't feel discouraged if things don't run as smoothly as words on paper might suggest. People and handbooks are two different things. And don't be surprised if you make mistakes, but try to learn from them. Growing pains are to be expected. This handbook has been developed on the basis of what has worked for parent groups. It may help you avoid some of the pitfalls and grow faster.

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From: Parents Organizing to Improve Schools
National Committee for Citizens in Education
Suite 410
Wilde Lake Village Green
Columbia, Maryland 21044

CHAPTER 1
STARTING FROM SCRATCH

This chapter is for you if you want to find out how to begin a parents' group. There may already be a parents' organization in your school. You can find out if there is by asking the principal. But if there is no such organization – or if, after you have attended some meetings and done some work with the established parents' group, you feel that another group is needed, this chapter should help you on the very first steps. Obviously, you may not have to go through all the steps proposed here. And if you prefer one suggestion to the others, try that one first.

IF YOUR CHILD IS JUST BEGINNING PUBLIC SCHOOL OR IF YOU ARE NEW IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, HOW CAN YOU FIND OTHER CONCERNED PARENTS?

1. Ask your child's teacher for the names of other parents in your child's class. Perhaps you could arrange for a pot-luck supper or after-school meeting with them.

2. Attend Board of Education (or School Board) meetings and see if other concerned parents are there.

3. Write a letter to the editor of your community newspaper asking other concerned parents to get in touch with you. And read your local newspaper for news of parent groups.

4. Ask the librarian at the school or the public library for names of other people concerned about public schools in the community.

5. Contact community organizations to find other interested persons. If these organizations do not have Education Committees, see if you can begin one.

ONCE YOU HAVE FOUND A FEW PEOPLE TO WORK WITH, HOW CAN YOU INVOLVE MORE?

The first step is for your small group to discuss the issues that concern you, as outlined in Chapter 2. Then look for other concerned parents by calling an open meeting. A flyer is a good device for letting interested parents know your plans. It might read as follows:

CONCERNED PARENTS
Let's Work Together for Quality Education
Come To a Meeting
Tuesday Night, December 8, at 7:30
At the home of Mary Smith, 200 Elmont Street

See if the principal will send a copy home with each child. If not, post copies in stores, churches and community centers and hand them out to students as they leave the school grounds. Or try personal contact by telephone, by going door-to-door, by making an announcement at other community meetings. See if the local radio station will make a public service announcement.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE IF A NEW ORGANIZATION IS NEEDED OR IF IT WOULD BE BETTER TO WORK WITH THE EXISTING GROUP?

Before you decide to form a new organization, there are some questions you should consider:

1. Who controls the established organization? Parents? Teachers? Principals? Who selects the leadership? Who votes on important issues?

(If you want your group to be controlled by parents, it would be a good idea to follow the lead of many successful parent organizations, which give voting membership only to the parents or legal guardians of children in the school, and offer non-voting, supporting membership to all other interested persons.)

2. Is the existing organization afraid of or not formed for action?

(It may have other purposes: social, fund-raising, or doing what the principal wants.)

3. Has a clique or inside group gained such control that new people cannot work their way into leadership positions?

(Check the by-laws. Find out how elections are run. A democratically run organization holds regular elections by voting members; it makes voting membership easy to attain; it offers a choice among candidates.)

If the established organization is a parent/teacher group, you should consider these questions, also:

(a) Do parents control the decision-making and selection of leadership? Who has voting membership?

(b) Do the teachers have a union and building committee to represent their interests? If so, should the parent association speak for parent interests?

(c) What happens when teachers' contract are up for renewal? Do parents have an effective voice in safeguarding the interests of their children? Who controls the parent/teacher association if a strike is threatened—the parents, or teachers, or principal?

HOW DOES A NEW PARENT GROUP ESTABLISH ITS IDENTITY?

The primary goal of a parent group should be recognition by other parents that it is an effective organization working to benefit the children at your school. Recognition by school officials should be a secondary question, and it will come only after or as a result of being known as a voice for parent and student concerns. The best way to establish your identity is to take *action* that improves the quality of education at your children's school. That means:

1. Winning one issue at a time—having a track record of small victories for children and parents.

2. Always being well informed.

3. Being persistent and committed to hanging in when the going gets rough.

4. In addition, it is important for the group to have a name and mailing address so that school

officials and parents can get in touch with you, and, as a publicity device, it is a good idea to use buttons or bumper stickers with the group name.

IF YOU SET UP A NEW ACTION-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION, HOW SHOULD YOU RELATE TO THE ESTABLISHED GROUP?

First, see if the existing organization is interested in the same goals as you are. Perhaps it can be turned into an activist group, or perhaps your group can become its action committee. If these things are not possible, you should nevertheless try to explain your goals to its members. Encourage their suggestions, making it clear that both groups are needed and have roles to play. Point out that all parents have the same aim—good education for their children—and that you do not want to compete as rivals.

Parents should never fight publicly with one another. They should present a united front to the system. Do not allow anyone or anything to set you fighting each other, thus diverting your energies and attention from children's needs. Keep your own group focused on action and do not waste energy fighting other parents.

WHAT ARE THE FIRST STEPS IN ESTABLISHING AN ORGANIZATION?

Taking *action* to improve the quality of education is the most important first step, but there are other organizational tasks that must be done at some point.

1. Select leadership:

After giving notice, preferably by mail, and giving people sufficient time to be able to plan to come, elect leadership. Select *functional* officers, not figure-heads or empty titles. Three jobs that must be done are those of the

A. *Chairperson*—to call meetings and keep in touch with the overall operation.

B. *Secretary*—to keep minutes and written records.

C. *Treasurer*—to keep careful financial records.

A new organization may want to elect or select its leadership for short terms (three months, for example) so that if the individuals chosen do not develop the needed leadership abilities, new people can step in. Some groups try a rotating presidency at the beginning, to keep the group flexible and to allow the "best" leadership to emerge. Avoid getting locked into the trap of having the organization live or die on one individual's success or failure. A healthy organization often has shared leadership and develops an ever-renewing supply of leaders. But it is also important to allow for organizational stability through some re-election of solid leaders.

2. Choose a name:

The choice of a name should be a group decision, and the name itself should reflect the goals or special role of the group. It should be short and easy to say, and should catch attention. Some names of parents' groups are: Parents United; Parents Union for Children; Advocates for Children; Our Kids; Parents for Better Schools; Parents for Education.

3. Find a meeting place:

If possible, try to meet in a public place—the school, a church, a community organization clubhouse, a library. Under certain circumstances, you may want to meet in a home.

4. Do *not* concern yourselves immediately with by-laws.

Worrying about by-laws early in the game can sap the time and energy the group should be spending on planning, action, fact-finding, and talking with other parents. Agree on rules as the need arises instead of spending long hours on the wording of by-laws.

5. Incorporation can also be dealt with later.

Do not concern yourself with this question until your organization has developed a record of accomplishment, and until you have found a lawyer who will do the necessary work for nothing or at cost.

SAMPLE LIST OF SCHOOL PROBLEMS

A. Kids don't like school.
B. Our school has a run-down, shabby appearance.
C. The attitude of the principal is poor.
D. One teacher belittles my daughter and her friends.
E. The lunchroom is overcrowded and unpleasant.
F. One office secretary is rude to parents and students.
G. The teachers' union contract gets in the way of class scheduling.
H. The children are not achieving.
I. The bathroom on the second floor is in bad condition.
J. The principal is too busy with administrative details and outside meetings.
K. Students don't behave—lack discipline.
L. Students and parents never know what is really going on.

CHAPTER 2
ORGANIZING FOR ACTION

Action that improves the quality of education is the goal of a parent group. There are four steps that must be taken if parent action is to be effective:

1. *Identify Problems*
2. *Set the Action Goal*
3. *Plan Strategy*
4. *Evaluate*

STEP (1) IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

1. LIST THE MOST PRESSING PROBLEMS AT YOUR SCHOOL. Find out what your concerns are, where the problems lie. LISTEN to each other.

Ask each member of the group to help brainstorm to discover problems. Do not stop to discuss each problem—just briefly state it and write it out on a blackboard or on a sheet of paper large enough so that everyone can see it. (This helps focus the group discussion so that it does not turn into a "gripe" session.)

Record each problem that is mentioned on a blackboard, a poster board, or yard-length sheet of paper. (Write big so that everyone in the group can see the writing. And stay as close as possible to the original language in which the problem was described.) Suppose your list looked like the one on the following page.

Another way to begin to identify problems is to use the checklist on the following page—"How Good Is Our School?"

HOW GOOD IS OUR SCHOOL?

_____ Does your child like to go to school? Why? Why not?

_____ Does every pupil who reads poorly get enough help?

_____ Are the individual learning needs of each student met?

_____ Does the principal know students by name?

_____ Does the principal know what's really happening in the school?

_____ Does the principal like parents to visit at all times?

_____ Do teachers believe and expect that every child can learn?

_____ Do teachers ridicule or yell at students?

_____ Do teachers contact parents *before* problems get big?

_____ Are student records available to parents upon request?

_____ Is there gossip about or unauthorized access to student records?

_____ Are students frequently suspended or expelled?

_____ Is the school like a jail or is it an exciting place for learning?

_____ Is there a choice of programs and approaches to teaching?

_____ Is the school clean and well kept—inside and out?

_____ Are the bathrooms clean and do they have paper and soap?

_____ Is the lunchroom a pleasant and relaxed place to eat?

_____ Is there a parents' handbook and a students' handbook which explains the rules, etc.?

_____ Are the hallways decorated with students' art and written work as a way to show that students' work is valued?

_____ Does your child's school have the same number of teachers and the same amount of supplies as other schools in the district? In nearby districts?

_____ Is discipline maintained in the classroom and on school grounds?

Do you have any suggestions of ways to make the school a better place for your child, for all children?

(Persons planning the meeting could add questions relevant to a particular school. You could also add spaces for varied responses. Yes _____ No _____ Sometimes _____)

2. SELECT ONE PROBLEM to zero in on and AGREE to work as a group to solve one problem at a time.

Since a group cannot solve every problem immediately, make an agreement to work together—to set priorities and concentrate efforts.

On a separate sheet of paper or on the blackboard list the following:

Criteria that the group can use for selecting the main issue.

(a) *Is it a problem that is URGENT in the school?*

It is easier to generate feeling and action around an urgent, highly visible problem. It's a good beginning spot.

(b) *Is it a problem that UNITES the parents in the group?*

Avoid divisive issues, especially when the group is new. Instead, select issues on which there is basic agreement. For example, all the members of the group would probably agree that students and parents should have some choice about the kind of education the school provides. But there might be deep differences of opinion as to the best curriculum or approach to learning.

One uniting issue might be that of parents' rights (see pages 48 and 49).

(c) *Is it a problem that THIS group of parents can do something about?*

Looking at the sample list of problems on page 10, a group of parents could get the second floor bathroom repaired (Item I), but would probably not be in a position to change the teachers' contract (Item G), at least not immediately. Changing the teachers' contract would be a long-range goal and probably would need a coalition with other groups.

(d) *Is it a problem that INTERESTS ME (each one in the group)?*

Solving the problem should give every member of the group some "pay-off," in the sense that everyone feels gratification or sees some evidence of an improved educational situation for the children. Those group members who don't get some satisfaction out of

working on the problem will drop out sooner or later.

(e) *Is it a problem that is O.K. for me and for this group to work on?*

If working on the problem raises conflict of interest questions for too many members, they may quietly back off. For example, if the rude office secretary is the wife of the employer of many parents in the group, or the wife of the minister of the main church in town—these conflicts would have to be very honestly and directly discussed before selecting it as the first problem.

(f) *Is it a problem that is WINNABLE?* Can you succeed in a reasonably short period of time?

Win some small, specific changes—then tackle some of the harder ones. Solving a problem builds group solidarity and provides the momentum to attack tough problems. For example, parents could deliberately decide to get the bathroom fixed as a first step because that problem is "winnable" in a short period of time

(g) *Is the problem a SYMPTOM or a ROOT CAUSE of low quality education?*

Sometimes a new group deliberately will decide to work on a problem that is a symptom rather than a root cause because it is usually easier to cure a symptom. However, the group should be aware of this, and should not be under the illusion that curing the symptom will solve the fundamental problems.

STEP (2) SETTING THE ACTION GOAL

It is vital for the group to state and agree on two major points:

What you want changed.

When you want it changed.

After you have selected the main problem to be worked on you may need to *assign people to get the facts* before setting your *action goal* and *plan of action*. (See chapter 3—Knowledge Is Power).

The same criteria for selecting the problem should be used to define and zero in on the action goal. (See page 13).

In the example above, suppose the group agreed that the main problem is the principal's poor attitude. But that statement is too broad and vague to serve as a satisfactory action goal. Instead, the group might define the goal this way:

> "Our action goal from January to June is to improve the tone and operation of the school by getting the principal to carry out his responsibilities as captain of the ship."

Defining an action goal is no easy task, and as the group begins to get more specific and move toward a plan of action, disagreement may surface. The group may need to pause and reassess:

> Is everyone clear why *this* action goal should be pursued?
>
> Can everyone still "buy into" trying to solve it?
>
> Is the action goal specific enough to produce some results fairly soon?

In our example, the group would need to get very precise and specific. It might decide that the goal of getting the principal to fulfill his/her responsibilities could best be achieved by tackling the symptoms—that is, getting the principal to solve some of the other specific problems the parents had identified:

- The second floor bathroom.
- The shabby appearance of the building: the dirty hallways and playground.
- The rude manner of the office secretary.
- The poorly-run lunchroom.

MORE FACT-FINDING is probably needed before agreeing on a plan of action. Assign several members of the group to:

1. Ask their children about the broken toilet and lunchroom confusion.
2. Visit the school and gather first-hand evidence or information about the bathroom, lunchroom, playground, and hallways.
3. Find school employees (teachers, aides, etc.) who are concerned about the children and can supply important facts.

Set a meeting date when members will report back.

STEP (3) PLANNING STRATEGY:

Develop a short-range set of action plans—concrete first steps and more generalized next steps.

Fact finding is usually the first step in a plan of action. It serves to acquaint members of the group with the nature of the problems and also prepares the group to plan the best strategy. Do not get locked into a plan of action that does not consider new information.

In our example, the group would come to the next meeting to report the results of their fact-finding:

- The second floor bathroom was broken when observed by Mrs. James.
- The playground was littered with paper and the gate was broken on Wednesday afternoon when observed by Mrs. James and again on Friday when visited by Mrs. Summers.
- The lunchroom was especially noisy and crowded on Thursday when it snowed. Mrs. Summers and Mr. Tole (who arranged to visit on his lunch hour) were both dismayed after their visit because it was worse than had been reported by their children. Talking with lunchroom personnel had been helpful.

Discuss alternative ways to resolve the problems and then *choose an action* plan that will secure the most immediate results.

In this case, the group might decide on the following:

1. Mrs. Summers will arrange a meeting Monday with the principal (at 8:15 or 4:15 so that working parents can attend).
2. Mrs. Summers will promptly notify other parents of the time.
3. At the meeting, the parents will ask the principal why the above conditions exist and request that the bathroom be repaired that week; that the custodian clean the playground more frequently; and that he develop a plan to improve the lunchroom. Mrs. James was assigned to take the minutes at the meeting. (Notes should always to taken at each meeting.)
4. After this first meeting with the principal, the group should plan a reporting back meeting to discuss further steps.

You will notice that the *plan of action* is very specific, with people assigned to specific tasks, with dates and times clearly agreed upon, with flexibility and a chance to report back and agree upon next steps.

Each time the group meets, the following should be discussed:

What *new information* do we have that affects our plan of action?

What do we need to *know* or *do* next?

Who will take responsibility for each task?

When do we want these tasks accomplished?

If these questions are asked, no one will leave a meeting that has been "just talk," and no action.

STEP (4) EVALUATING:

Evaluating is simply finding out what has happened. What have we accomplished? What do we need to do next?

Get regular *feedback* from the group by asking:

How are we doing as a group?

Is everyone in agreement with what we're doing?

What did we do that was effective?

What mistakes did we make?

Self-evaluation is important for building a strong group. As much as 20% of the group's time should be allowed for this kind of feedback. It helps the group see where it is. It gives members a chance to air feeling (positive and negative) directly in the group instead of "back-biting" over the telephone or after the meeting.

This may seem risky and scary at first; you may be afraid that conflict and disagreement will split the group. But in fact, groups are more likely to dissolve if hurt feelings or differences of opinion are ignored or allowed to fester under the surface with some people dropping out or others hanging on until there's a "blow-out."

In a group of 10-20 people (more than 20 may want to divide into sub-groups), the leader of the group may suggest that each person take a minute or two to respond to the question, "How are we do-

ing as a parent group? Are we being effective?" — with *no* comments or discussion of the points made. *The leader must firmly insist that this rule be obeyed until everyone has had his/her say.* This allows everyone to speak and be heard without fear of being criticized and it also gets all the feelings out on the table.

A number of negative feelings may surface. But don't be surprised at the positive ones. You're also likely to hear:

I see now that I need a parent group if I'm to be effective;

I've learned how to ask the right questions;

I used to think no one else cared. I see now that's not true.

FEEDBACK IS A NECESSITY, not a frill.

CHAPTER 3

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Getting and using information is the basis for effective action. As a group and as individuals parents must develop fact-finding skills if they are to improve the schools.

HOW CAN YOU GET IMPORTANT INFORMATION?

1. Ask **school officials** for a *copy in writing* of any school policy or budget information etc., you may need. Ask the principal first. If necessary, go up the chain of authority to the superintendent and Board of Education.

Make your request *in writing* and *keep a carbon copy* for your records.

2. Ask **students**, who can be an excellent source of information, about *what really happens* in the schools.

Your own children, their friends, and your friends' children or a survey of student opinion can help give an honest picture of what goes on and what is needed.

3. Identify persons on the **school staff** (teachers, custodians, the librarian, counselors, classroom aides) who are concerned about quality education and who know what in fact occurs daily in the school. *Be careful to protect your sources of information.* Never identify the persons who gave you vital information unless you have received their permission. If there is tension in the school or destructive personnel, staff members' jobs may be endangered if they "talk out of school." Moreover, there are limits to what even the best-intentioned

staff members can do. A teacher, for example, can raise questions and push for change "through channels" but in the end is a school employee and subject to dismissal. However, a parent group can ask questions, make demands, and push for changes as consumers and citizens without fear of losing their jobs and with independent power in their hands.

4. Find out what is happening in **other school districts** by visiting the schools (usually call first to make an appointment) or by making contact with parents in other school systems.

5. Write the **State Board of Education** and/or Chief State School Officer (Secretary, Commissioner, or Superintendent of Public Education) (see list of addresses on page 30) for specific and general information to double check what you find through other sources. For example, you may inquire about policies and programs in other school districts in the state.

6. Write to **national organizations** that can supply independent sources of information and ideas on what other parent groups are doing. Among the organizations that can help are:

- National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044. Toll-free call 800—Network.
- Institute for Responsive Education, 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215.
- Childrens Defense Fund, 1763 R. Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.
- Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 733 15th Street, N.W., Suite 520, Washington, D.C. 20005.
- National Coalition of ESEA Title I Parents, 416 W. Sixth Street, Wilmington, Delaware 19801.
- National School Boards Association, 800 State National Bank Plaza, Evanston, Illinois 60201.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO ASK FOR INFORMATION FROM SCHOOL OFFICIALS?

1. *Make requests in writing* whenever possible and keep a carbon copy of all requests – even those that are handwritten.

2. *Do not hold back for fear of seeming nosey.* You are not sticking your nose in other people's business. Your children's education and the way the public schools are run are your business. They're your children and it's your tax money that enables public schools to exist. School officials are hired as your public servants. In fact, it is their responsibility to inform you, the public. Parents have a right to know all that the educators know.

3. *Do not be put off by vague answers.* Ask the question again as specifically and directly as possible. Sometimes school officials assume that parents don't really care to know the detailed facts or aren't equipped to handle such information. By the directness and persistence of your questions you can help educate school officials both to their responsibility to inform parents and to the fact that parents are a group to contend with. One school official told a parent organization, "We were astounded when you asked for precise figures on reading budgets for each school. No parents have ever asked for it before. But I realize you need the information to really understand the reading program."

4. *Don't be put off by educational jargon.* If you don't understand such phrases as "standardized tests," "line-item allocations," "learning disabilities," do not let embarrassment keep you from asking what they mean. Sometimes educational jargon is used to cloud the issue or to create "insiders" and "outsiders." Show your intelligence by asking questions when you don't know the terms or facts.

5. *Be persistent.* Keep asking. In one school district it took parents 18 months to get the reading scores for each school published in readable form.

6. If information is given in educational jargon, hard to read statistics, or boring technical style, find someone in the parent group or in the community (a newspaper reporter, or university teacher, a

librarian, a minister) who *can decode it into accurate and readable form* so your members can make use of it.

7. If your requests for information are consistently ignored, try sending a *certified letter*.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF SCHOOL OFFICIALS REFUSE TO GIVE YOU THE INFORMATION YOU NEED?

Most states now have a "right to know" or "Sunshine Law," which grants every citizen the right to examine and make copies of public records of public agencies like school districts. These may include salaries of personnel, budgets, records and minutes and resolutions passed at School Board meetings, and (scores of standardized reading tests). Write to your Governor or State Attorney General for a copy of the "right-to-know" law in your state.

If school officials refuse to give you information, have them show you in writing the law stating citizens are not entitled to the information. If they persist in their refusal, inform your local newspaper and/or get in touch with The American Civil Liberties Union, 22 East 40th Street, New York, N.Y. 10016. It can provide information and advice on steps to take.

WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION CAN PARENTS ASK FOR?

1. You can ask for any information that you need: "Sunshine Laws" usually define what does NOT have to be released.

2. Information about money, decision-making power, and accountability is often vital.

All school policies should be in writing. Ask for proof of existence of a policy. For example, policy on homework, promotion, placement in classes, early dismissal should all be in writing. A Parents and Students Handbook containing such information should be given to each parent and student.

Budgets – general and specific – are public information. It is absolutely vital to get copies of the school budget. How money is spent often shows the

real priorities of a school system. Compare budget priorities with stated goals. And be sure that your school district holds open public budget hearings.

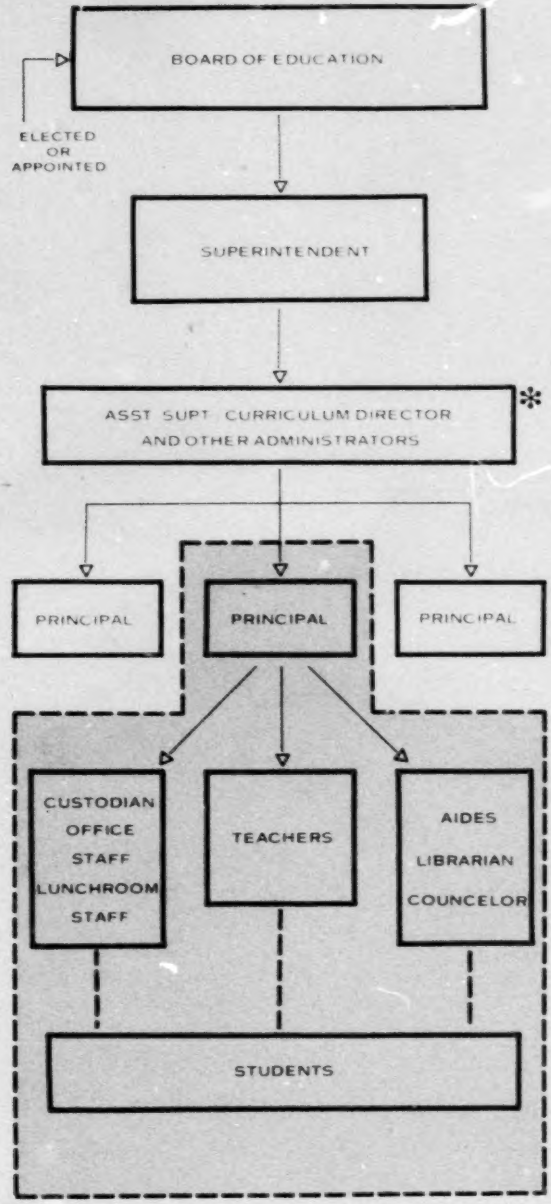
Reading scores – the results of standardized tests are especially important. Ask for school-by-school and grade-by-grade breakdowns. (Individual student scores are available only to the child's parents.)

Goals of the school – The parent group could begin the year by asking the principal for a written statement of the goals for the school – general goals and *specific goals for that year.* Every parent should be given a copy so that everyone can discuss them at a parent meeting. (see sample letter below.)

TO: Mary James, *Principal*
FROM: Parents for Better Schools
SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ABOUT OUR SCHOOL

We would like to obtain some information about our school so that parents can be fully informed. We would appreciate your written response to the following questions:

(1) What are the goals of our school?
(2) What are the most successful aspects of our school? How do you account for the success?
(3) What kind of factual information is available to show that our school is doing a good job of educating students?
(4) How does the school determine that students are mastering necessary skills at the appropriate levels? If they are not mastered, what action is taken?
(5) What provisions are there for parents (and students) to participate in decision making?
(6) What are the most important contributions that parents can make to the school? What do you do to help our school?
(7) What do you think our parent organization could do to help our school?



**In large school districts "other administrators" may mean 25-500 people. Ask for an organization chart for your school district from the superintendent. Find out the structure in your school district. Fill in the names and phone numbers of key people.*

School Board Resolutions and Minutes—In some districts procedures have been adopted that enable parents to get and act upon information.

A. The *conferences* and executive sessions held before the public school board meeting are open to the public.

B. The *agenda* for school board meetings is mailed beforehand to interested parent groups.

C. *Copies* of resolutions to be voted upon are given to parents and citizens atteding the meeting.

D. Parents and citizens can ask questions about and speak to specific resolutions *before* a vote is taken.

E. Special public hearings on the budget are held, with full notice in the newspaper and mailings to concerned citizens to invite citizen response.

F. Public notice in the newspaper is given before the Board votes on tenure for teachers.

HOW DO YOU DISCOVER THE POWER STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL AND SCHOOL SYSTEM SO YOU KNOW WHOM TO CONTACT TO INITIATE CHANGES?

The diagram on the opposite page shows the formal organizational structure of most school districts.

The formal power structure—who hires and fires, who is accountable to whom—is public information and should be available upon request. Make sure parents know the general structure and also the names of the persons with whom they must deal. A Parent Handbook listing the names and school telephone numbers of all staff in local schools is useful.

The informal power structure—how decisions actually get made and who wields the real power—can only be discovered by asking questions and learning through actions.

RIGHT TO INSPECT YOUR CHILD'S RECORDS

PARENTS HAVE THE RIGHT TO:

1. Inspect your child's school record.
2. Take a parent advocate with you.
3. Have copies made of the record.
4. Have false or misleading information removed from the record.

HOW TO INSPECT AND REVIEW YOUR CHILD'S RECORD:

Make an appointment to review your child's records. Call his/her counselor first. You may have to make an appointment with the principal.

Examine the record—Plan to spend from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Someone will probably explain the various forms to you. Then you should request, and if necessary insist that you be given time to look through the record by yourself at your own pace. Examine the back and the front of every form.

Your Rights—You have the right to take notes on material in the record. You may have copies of anything in the record. (There may be a charge for copies.)

THE RECORD CONSISTS OF:

1. Pupil Pocket—holding an assortment of forms.
2. Test Results—which may be in the pupil pocket or elsewhere.
3. Medical Records—which are usually filed in the nurse's office.
4. Attendance Records—which may be in the pupil pocket or elsewhere.
5. Grades—Grades and teachers comments for previous years should be in the pupil pocket.

IN ADDITION, A CHILD'S RECORDS MAY INCLUDE:

1. Counseling Record—which is kept in the counselor's office.
2. Psychological Record—which may be in the pupil pocket or elsewhere.
3. Discipline Record—If acquired in another school, it will be in the pupil pocket. If acquired in the present school, it will probably be in the administrator's office. You should ask to see all parts of the discipline record.

For further information or assistance contact: Parents Union for Public Schools in Philadelphia—574-0337.

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HOW CAN INFORMATION BE USED EFFECTIVELY?

1. Inform other parents with:

A. *Flyers—Fact Sheets.* When using flyers or fact sheets to get information to other parents, make them factual, concise, and well organized and use clear, simple language. A sample flyer on Right to Inspect School Records is shown on the opposite page.

(*a*) how much factual information is included on one page

(*b*) the telephone number and address of a contact for further information is listed

(*c*) spacing makes it readable and attractive

(*d*) the language is simple and precise.

B. *Newsletters.* A regular newsletter or news sheet—preferably mailed to every parent at a school—helps keep all parents better informed.

C. *Newspapers, radio, television.* The reporters on your local papers, and radio and television stations should be provided with information regularly by mail and they should be contacted personally as important problems surface. (Facts and figures are especially appealing to them.) Put contact people on your newsletter mailing list. *Letters to the editor*—about good programs or problems—can be used to inform other parents and concerned citizens. A written press release is a good way to tell your story accurately. (Contact the National Committee for Citizens in Education for a press-media handbook.)

2. Inform school officials:

A. *School Board Members*—Do not assume that School Board members are aware of problems that parents see at local schools. Help them learn by sending them information about these problems before the School Board meeting takes place. Be sure you inform every member of the Board. In some school districts, the superintendent (and

administrators) like the power that control over information gives them and do not fully inform Board members.

Invite individual members of the Board to visit your school with members of your parent group

B. *School superintendent* – The school superintendent is usually faced with many pressures on his/her time and also may not be fully aware of what is happening to children in a particular school. It may be both courtesy and good strategy to send a copy of letters and documents to the superintendent also.

Presenting facts to school officials – the principal, superintendent, and/or school board – is a *must*. Some groups establish monthly meetings with the principal.

3. Use FACTS as a basis for ACTION and use ACTIONS to uncover more FACTS.

A. Some vital information can only be uncovered after taking some action first. For example, a parent group could decide to focus on repairing broken toilets and after gathering some facts decide to meet with the principal to present their demands. At that meeting they may find that the principal has – to no avail – already written at least three letters requesting repairs and feeling frustrated. He/she may welcome the parents' support and initiative and suggest that parents send a letter to the facilities repair department with a copy to the superintendent.

B. As discussed in Chapter 2, make a tentative plan of action but expect to *keep uncovering more information with each step of the action plan*. That is why it is so important to report back to the total group after taking action (such as, for example, meeting with school officials).

C. Carefully written records are critical. Keep *a log* of all telephone calls and letters to school officials, and be sure to record date and time.

D. After a meeting with school officials, write a letter of understanding of what occurred at the meeting. It can be as simple as this:

"Our unde standing of the issues discussed and agreements reached at the meeting on (date and time) were:

Present at the meeting were (list names of parents and list name of school officials.)"

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CHAPTER 4
TALKING WITH SCHOOL OFFICIALS

An important part of any action plan is negotiating with school officials. Some may be valuable allies. But others may be evasive or difficult to deal with. You must expect both kinds and be able to deal with them.

HOW CAN YOU IDENTIFY AND WORK WITH CONCERNED SCHOOL STAFF?

1. It is a mistake to assume that all teachers, principals, or other school officials are "the enemy." Many are deeply concerned about the children with whom they spend five or more hours a day. Such dedicated school staff needs support and praise. It is critical to discover who they are and to build good working relationships with them.

2. Asking questions and testing people's responses to specific situations are the best ways to identify allies. Expect different allies at different times. For example, classroom teachers may be strong allies on day to day issues, but disagreements may develop when the teachers' contract is up for renewal.

3. Always focus on the *real* problem—rather than blaming the person nearest at hand. For example, the root cause of poor quality education may be the alliance of politicians and power elite who control the School Board and tie the hands of the school staff. Classroom teachers, like policemen, often get blamed because they are on the front lines and are more visible than those who may be controlling the community behind closed doors.

HOW CAN PARENT GROUPS LEARN TO DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH SCHOOL OFFICIALS?

After a parent group has decided on the problem(s) that need to be solved and changes that need to be made to meet their children's needs, demands (or requests) must be presented to the school principal or perhaps to the School Board. At this point, you must anticipate responses from school officials which may be excuses for inaction.

Some groups role-play the situation at a planning meeting in order to get practice in responding to school officials' reasons for inaction. Two parents could be assigned to play the role of principal and counselor and given a list of ways to avoid dealing with the parents' demands. This kind of role-play gives parents practice in recognizing ways that school officials consciously or unconsciously evade dealing with parental concerns. *Practice is the best way to learn to negotiate effectively.*

The following list of possible responses that evade the issue or divert parents from pressing their problems to a solution could be used as preparation for a meeting with school officials.

We're the Experts — *We educators know best and must make these decisions. You do not understand all the complex issues involved.*

Parents must continually assert that they *do* know their children's needs and no one knows them better. School officials are paid by us to *serve* the needs of the children and the community.

Denial of the problem — *That is not a real problem in our school. Do you have any proof?*

Perhaps the school official is not aware of the problems and the parent group is serving an important role by informing him or her.

Parents should come to meeting with evidence (documented, if possible — firsthand reports of parents and students are best).

The exception — *The examples you cite are exceptions. It may be happening to just a few children; it certainly isn't widespread.*

Parents should point out that each child in the school is important and should ask the officials to prove the problem is not widespread. For

example, if the problem is suspension of five children, documented by the parent group, ask for the record of suspensions at the school over the past year. Put the burden of proof on the school official. That is where it belongs, especially since parents may not have access to all records.

Blaming the victim—*With this type of student at this school, we really can't do that much.*

Blaming the child rather than the system, which itself may be structured to create problems (of discipline, drop-outs, reading failure, trash on the playground) is a common way to avoid facing real problems. The school is set up to serve the children of the community, and school officials are paid to design a school environment that meets the needs of all children.

Blaming other parents—*We know it's a problem, but those parents don't seem to care about their own children.*

Do not accept this attempt to evade the issue by shifting blame to parents. Hold school officials accountable for what happens at the school. Parents as a group must stick together and not allow other parents to be labelled "bad parents" because of their overwhelming problems or inadequate avenues of communication between home and school. An example is labelling parents of Spanish-speaking children as uneducated and uninterested in school when all school meetings are in English and such school officials as the principal and counselor can't speak Spanish.

Delaying—*Yes, I know the problem exists, but we need time to figure out the best thing to do.*

Ask specifically what is being done to solve the problems. Ask for their *plans in writing* with a *timetable* and the names of *people responsible* for implementing the plan.

Passing the buck—*Yes, that is a problem, but I can't do anything because my hands are tied (by district policy, the teachers' contract, higher officials in the school administration, the computer system).*

Ask to see copies in writing of the school board policy, teachers' contract, or superintendent's memo that excuses the principal from acting. If the principal, in fact, is not ac-

countable, then appeal over his head to the official who is responsible.

An unimportant problem — *Yes, it may be a problem but there are so many more pressing issues at this school.*

Do not be sidetracked. You believe the problem is important and should be dealt with because it affects children directly.

We're not so bad — *Yes, it's a problem in all schools, but we're not doing any worse than others.*

Just because children in other schools or other school districts are not getting a quality education, officials in your school are not excused from doing their job properly. The standard for performance should be the needs of the children in your community, not the incompetence of school officials.

Further study — *This problem needs further study and research before we can act wisely.*

Ask what can be done now to help the children who are suffering until the research is completed. (Also ask who is doing the study. Ask for the timetable for the research and plans for implementation.)

No money — *Yes, that's needed but we are so short of funds and are facing budget cuts already.*

Lack of funds is a convenient excuse. Dig deeper to the issue of priorities. It may mean, "We do not want to spend money on what you want." Press the importance of what you see as priorities, which may mean cutting out an outdated program or position. But also raise the issue of getting more money for schools and our children if the money pot is too small in the first place. If children are the most valuable resource for our country's future, local, state and federal governments need to fund public schools adequately.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF SCHOOL OFFICIALS REFUSE TO DO ANYTHING?

Parent groups try to accomplish change by working through channels — that is, they move up the line of authority, from the principal to the superintendent to the school board. But if this procedure gets no results, there are other options:

1. **Higher appeal** to political leaders or state officials who may have authority or influence over the school board.
2. **Legal action** in the courts—bringing suit on a violation of rights, or to challenge a policy or practice.
3. **Direct action** through public demonstrations or boycotts to attract public attention and pressure school officials to face up to problems.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR PARENT ORGANIZATION?

_____ Does it have interesting, lively meetings?

_____ Does it make everyone feel welcome?

_____ Does everyone know everyone else's name?

_____ Does everyone have a chance to *talk*?

_____ Does everyone have a job to do?

_____ Are the *top jobs* passed around?

_____ Does everyone know what's going on?

_____ Does it keep a record of its meetings?

_____ Are the financial records open and understandable to all?

_____ Are people effectively informed of meeting times and places?

_____ Has it a *plan of action*?

_____ Does it *get things done*?

_____ Comments on the ways the organization can be improved _____

_____

_____

CHAPTER 5
MAKING IT WORK

An established organization needs to assess its effectiveness, leadership, fund-raising, and use of resources. The suggestions and checklists in this chapter should help the on-going process of making the organization work and grow.

RATE YOUR PARENT ORGANIZATION

The list of questions on the opposite page can be used at a parent meeting to get feed-back from the members; by a new parent group working to establish an effective parent organization; by the executive committee of an established parent association to assess what needs attention.

You may want to add other questions or add spaces for varied responses. Yes _____, No _____, Sometimes _____. If after using the rating sheet, you find your organization has major weaknesses, take time in the group to discuss what to do. Or you may want to call on someone outside the group for help and suggestions.

LEADERSHIP—IT'S THERE, DEVELOP IT

The list on the next page can be used by individual leaders in the group as a check on their effectiveness. It can also be used by the members of the group as a discussion-starter on developing effective leadership or before selecting a president and other officers.

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP?

_____ Do I listen carefully to what other parents say? (or do I really think my ideas are best?)

_____ Do I make it easy for new people to work their way into leadership positions? (or do I prefer a closed group?)

_____ Do I ask for help for big and little tasks? (or just for busy-work that I'm unwilling to do?)

_____ Do I talk of what "our" parent group achieved? (or what "I" did?)

_____ Do I see things as group successes and failures? (or do I claim credit for successes and blame others for failures?)

_____ Do I assign tasks so nearly every person leaves a meeting with an assignment? (or am I the only person with work to do after a meeting?)

_____ At the next meeting, do I check out which tasks have been carried out and which ones are undone? (or am I afraid to hold others accountable?)

_____ Do I follow through on assignments so I can be relied upon (or am I overextended or forgetful?)

_____ Do I encourage and draw out the abilities of members of the group? (or do I assume that no one can do it as well as I?)

_____ Do I carefully plan a meeting or am I disorganized?

_____ Do I strike a balance between setting direction and focusing a discussion and allowing everyone a chance to be heard? (or am I indecisive and/or undemocratic?)

_____ Do I expect some conflict and disagreements among group members? (or am I afraid of conflict and take everything as a personal attack?)

_____ Do I help the group develop a vision and goals? (or do I get bogged down in interpersonal tensions and petty details?)

_____ Am I able to keep something confidential so that group members trust me? (or do I forget loyalties in public or private?)

MAKE EACH MEETING COUNT

A. *What kind of planning makes for a good parent meeting?*

1. Set the *date* well enough in advance.

2. *Publicity* is critical. Make sure each parent gets at least *two notices*—one in advance and one the day before the meeting. Mailed notices and/or notices sent home with each child are useful. R.S.V.P. is a way to make people feel more responsible and committed to coming. Phone calls can then be made to people who haven't responded. A telephone chain could be set up in each classroom with one or two parents in charge.

3. *Plan an agenda* and have a copy for each person or print it on large paper or on a chalkboard so everyone can see it. The persons planning the agenda should ask: Is the purpose of the meeting clear? What will be accomplished? Who will do what? The agenda should leave time for assigning tasks and setting a date for the next meeting.

4. Prepare a *reception* table where people can sign up as they come in and get a name tag and/or information about the group or the school.

WHAT ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING?

1. Are people welcomed as individuals?

Suggestions: In a small meeting let people *introduce* themselves.

In a large meeting, use *name tags*.

Sitting in a circle so everyone can see and talk to everyone else puts all the members of the group on an equal basis.

2. Are the people who come made to feel welcome and valued?

Suggestions: Never open the meeting with a complaint "Why don't parents come out for meetings." This makes those parents who *did* come feel like not coming again. If a small number of parents come to a meeting, involve them and develop plans to reach other parents for the next meeting. Five to ten parents can make changes in a school.

If a large number of parents come, try to make sure a few people don't dominate the meeting and try to have each person leave with a task. Be sure to have a sign-up sheet so follow-up phone calls can be made.

3. Do members know what is to be discussed and accomplished?

Suggestions: Present the agenda and ask for any additions. Ask the group to set a time to end the meeting. If meetings drag on too long, ask one person to be timekeeper and remind the group. But aim to get the whole group to accept the responsibility for keeping the meeting on focus.

4. Are reports kept brief?

Suggestions: Some reports can be written out and made available for members to read as they come in. This is especially useful in the case of the treasurer's statement and other detailed reports. Brief oral reports can still be given.

5. Is prime time given to planning further action on the main issue(s) after reports have been made on fact-finding and actions taken since the last meeting?

Suggestion: Put announcements, requests from principals, etc. at the end of the meeting.

6. Are meetings focused on real problems rather than gripe sessions?

Suggestion: Point out that it is not the purpose of the meeting to vent anger at other group members. It is much better to use that energy to deal with the people who have the power to make necessary changes in the school.

HOW SHOULD A PARENT ORGANIZATION USE ITS FUNDS?

Suggested Priorities are:

1. To establish an effective communication network among the parents in the school. This could involve money for paper and stamps to mail notices of meetings, and a newsletter to every parent. (Notices carried home by children often don't

get parents attention. Check at the Post Office to find out the procedure for getting a *bulk rate permit* which costs 2¢ apiece for a mailing to 200 or more people at one time. (If there are not 200 parents at your school, you could *expand your mailing* list to include newspapers and media contacts, other parent groups, community groups.)

2. To pay expenses (child care, travel, telephone bills) incurred by parents who volunteer their time.

3. To hire a consultant or outside resource person to help develop the organization.

4. To pay a coordinator or administrative secretary to work (perhaps part-time) to deal with all the time-consuming details that must get done if your organization is to be effective.

This may be needed if most parents are working full-time or if the school is large. For example, a high school parent group that raises $7,000 per year in various fund raising activities could hire a part-time coordinator for $4,000 to build an effective action-oriented parent group.

(A pamphlet on fund raising is being prepared by the National Committee for Citizens in Education. Refer to it for suggestions of ways to raise funds.)

HOW CAN FUND RAISING BE USED TO BUILD RATHER THAN SAP ENERGY FROM A PARENT GROUP?

Criteria for fund raising should include:

1. Is there a real need and stated goal for the fund raising? (For example, to hire a parent organization coordinator or buy a piece of equipment that will directly benefit the students?)

2. Does the fund raising build personal relationships and a sense of community and belonging?

3. Will fund raising consume so much time that members will be too busy to take action to improve the quality of education? For example, will valuable parent and student time be spent to raise money to buy equipment and supplies that should be provided by the School Board? Would it be better to have parents and students spend their time lobbying the School Board?

4. Does it further the goals and values of the school? For example, is it a paperback book sale or a candy sale?

5. Are new people drawn to the organization through fund raising activities?

6. Is the fund-raising activity evaluated each year to see if it meets the above criteria?

WHAT KIND OF OUTSIDE RESOURCES CAN HELP A PARENT GROUP?

Be on the lookout for:

1. An *accountant* in your community who can help the treasurer set up effective bookkeeping procedures and protect the group against problems with money. (This is very important.)

2. *Lawyers* who can offer advice and support on individual and group issues and who can help file incorporation papers. (Contact American Bar Association in your community or state.)

3. *Writers* to draft press releases, newsletters.

4. *College students* who might take field placements in a community organization. (Contact the social work and education departments in nearby colleges or universities.)

5. *Researchers* to help dig into critical issues. (Contact librarians and local universities.)

6. *Businessmen* who may donate paper, typewriters, duplicating equipment.

7. *Churches* and *community organizations* that may provide meeting space, use of mimeograph machines.

(Lists of resource people in local communities are being collected by the National Committee for Citizens in Education call 800-NET-WORK.)

CHAPTER 6
BUILDING PARENT POWER

Building effective parent organizations means building on parent's strengths. But parents—and parents' groups—have limitations, and you must be aware of these if your members are to *act* effectively to achieve your common goals.

STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON.

1. *NUMBERS*

Broad-based membership means broad-based support—if it is effectively organized.

Suggestion: Membership could be open to all parents of children in the schools, with voluntary fees. Potentially, the parents of the country's 45 million public school pupils represent a formidable power. But since numbers alone do not create an effective organization, there should be a small, *representative* group—executive board, action committee, or some other group—with authority to make decisions and act quickly. This group can be chosen by, and answerable to, the larger body which has final decision-making authority. Parents of young children should be sought because their participation over a long period can provide continuity. The key is group action: if parents stick together, they can get what they want.

2. *CONCERN FOR CHILDREN.*

Parents' primary reason for belonging to an organization is their concern for their children's education. An effective parent organization produces results for its members and their children.

Suggestion: The organization's focus must be kept on specific issues that most directly affect

children. Those members whose concerns, although serious, affect a relatively small group, should form a committee to work on their particular problems and report to the main group.

3. *TRADITION OF VOLUNTEERING*

The tradition of volunteering has always been strong in our schools, and it is a source of energy in any parent organization — provided that the volunteers are not used for work that should be done by paid employees.

Suggestion: Decide what kind of volunteer efforts will be most effective — for example, regular observers at School Board meetings and volunteer auditors of school expenditures may do more good than reading aides. But *all* school volunteers can provide valuable service and can learn what is happening in the schools, as long as they do not permit themselves to be used.

STRESSES ON PARENTS

1. *EMERGENCY PRIORITIES.*

Families come first — sick children, overflowing sinks, other domestic crises take precedence over organizational activities. But continuity of activity is necessary.

Suggestion: There must be flexibility, with a clearly defined procedure to follow in case key people cannot take part in planned activities. There can be shared responsibility, with designated pinch hitters. There might be a paid staff member, as the organization grows, to coordinate activities.

2. *OTHER COMMITMENTS.*

Parents who work or have other demands on their time must allocate it carefully and should not be criticized if they are not as active as others.

Suggestions: Recognize that there will be different degrees of participation, and that all are valuable if properly utilized. There will be the *extremely active parents*, who will probably keep the organization going day-to-day; the *occasionally active ones*, who can be called on for special projects, perhaps involving their special expertise; *those who will show up only when there is a crisis*, providing a show of strength when required; and those who do not

attend meetings but are willing to do specific tasks at home.

Meeting at night, rather than in the daytime, may encourage more parents to attend.

Effective use of volunteers, so that people feel their contribution is really needed, is the best way to encourage continued participation.

3. *REPRISAL AND REPRESSION.*

Some parents feel that if they make waves their children will suffer. Most experience some sense of intimidation by the atmosphere of authority associated with the schools, probably based on memories of their own school days. But schools exist to serve children, and school employees are public servants.

Suggestion: Discuss "reprisal" fears openly. If they seem genuine, perhaps a parent advocate from another school, or a minister or other outside person can intervene. There is strength in unity—in acting as a group. Emphasize that parents, through their children, are educational consumers and have every right to question its quality and to organize to improve it. Some parents who experienced being treated "like poison" by school officials found that persistence, knowing the facts, or acting with a group of parents turned the officials' attitude into one of respect.

HOW CAN PARENTS BE HELPED TO FEEL PROUD TO BE PARENTS AND MEMBERS OF THE PARENT ORGANIZATION?

Being a parent in American society is difficult. Everything is expected of parents although no real training is offered on how to be a parent. Blaming the parent is too often an excuse for the schools' failure to teach Johnny to read. Many parents feel inadequate in the presence of the "professionals" who have a college degree to "prove" they know what's best for the child.

An important function of a parent group is to help parents feel proud of their profession—parenthood.

Ways to do this are:

1. Discuss problems and frustrations openly. Invite competent outside speakers to meetings to

discuss the problems that are brought up.

2. Focus the long range goals of the organization around *parents' rights*. The federal law (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974) was a first step—guaranteeing each parent the right to inspect his child's school record. (See the resource section for additional materials on parents' rights.) Educating one another about our rights and working as a group to act on our rights as parents can be a primary purpose of the organization.

3. Discuss the meaning of *parent power*. Power has been so misused at so many levels of American society that to many people power has became a dirty word. Parent power means that parents have *a voice in the decisions affecting their children*. (It does not mean running the schools or teaching classes. Principals and teachers are paid from public funds to do that.) Parent power means that parent organizations had the *resources and opportunity to participate as equals in major decisions* rather than being ignored or asked simply to rubber-stamp decisions that already had been made by others. Parent power can be established through action by effectively organized groups of parents.

RESOURCES

Parent Power: A candid handbook for dealing with your child's school. Martin Buskin. Walker and Company. New York, 1975. $8.95.
Written for parents, especially those living in the suburbs. Discusses qualities of a good school district; curriculum; tests; special education; guidance counseling; and citizen committees.

Parents' Rights Handbook. Advocates for Education, 27 East Drive, Linwood, New Jersey 08221. $1.00. (Detailed reference edition $7.50).
Carefully researched handbook on legal basis for parents' rights in New Jersey in relation to children's assignment to schools and classes, curriculum, suspension and expulsion, health and safety, accountability of teachers and administrators, lunch programs and transportation.

Promoting Your Cause: Howard Bloomenthal, Funk and Wagnalls, New York, 1974. $3.50.
How to use the news media, plan a campaign, conduct a meeting, make a speech, and create displays and exhibits.

How to Change The Schools: A Parents' Action Handbook on How To Fight the System. Ellen Lurie, Random House, New York, 1970.
This hard hitting book, filled with specifics, is out of print but may be available at your library.

Making School Work: An Education Handbook for Students, Parents and Professionals. Available from Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 2 Park Square, Boston, Massachusetts 02116, $3.95.
The question and answer format covers topics like school attendance, discipline, fees, Title I, special education, kindergarten, lunches, tracking and school records. It is written for Massachusetts but contains ideas and facts that are useful for parents in other states.

The Community Activists' Handbook: A Guide for Citizen Leaders and Planners. John Huenefeld, Beacon Press, Boston, 1970. $2.95.
Written for action around general community problems, this book contains specific suggestions for building an organization membership, use of press, planning meetings.

PARENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS

Parents Union's work on educating and acting on the Parents Bill of Rights, resulted in the adoption of a Parents Bill of Rights and Responsibilities by the Philadelphia Board of Education in May, 1975. The School Board adopted #1, 2, 4-13, 16 & 20.

EVERY PARENT HAS THE RIGHT TO:

1. BE TREATED WITH COURTESY by all members of the school staff.

2. INSPECT HIS OR HER CHILD'S CUMULATIVE RECORD and remove or correct any false or misleading statements in conformity with current guidelines established by the state and federal governments.

3. VISIT SCHOOLS AND CLASSES after notifying the principal and in accordance with guidelines which establish the rights of parents, while protecting the rights of teachers.

4. BE INFORMED OF ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS of any school program.

5. BE INFORMED OF SCHOOL POLICIES and administrative decisions.

6. BE INFORMED OF APPROVED PROCEDURES FOR SEEKING CHANGES in school policies and for appealing administrative decisions.

7. BE INFORMED OF ALL PROGRAMS in special education.

8. APPEAL THE PLACEMENT, in accordance with established guidelines, of his or her child in a special education class.

9. Expect that every attempt will be made by school personnel to insure the RECEIPT BY PARENTS OF IMPORTANT NEWS AND MESSAGES FROM SCHOOL.

10. Participate in meaningful PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES to discuss his or her child's school progress and welfare.

11. REASONABLE PROTECTION FOR his or her child from physical harm while under school authority.

12. Organize and participate in organizations for PARENTS ONLY.

13. ASSISTANCE FROM SCHOOL PERSONNEL to further the progress and improvement of his or her child, which includes, but is not limited to, counseling, tutorial and remedial programs, as well as information about academic and psychological services within and without the School District.

14. A FULL DAY OF EDUCATION for his or her child within the legally defined number of hours and days.

15. Participate in PLANNING AND SCHEDULING whenever SHIFTS are necessary.

16. TO BE INFORMED of the procedures, data and information required to properly select and assign administrators, principals and faculty.

17. TO BE INFORMED of the services and data that enable administrators and principals to properly carry out their functions, powers and duties.

18. ASSIST in the interviewing and selection for principals.

19. Participate in FACULTY EVALUATION under agreed upon guidelines approved by the Board, recognizing that the responsibility for final evaluation rests with the principal.

20. BE RESPECTED AS AN INDIVIDUAL, regardless of race, creed, national origin, economic status, sex or age.

21. A GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE with the RIGHT OF JUDICIAL APPEAL.

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NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CITIZENS IN EDUCATION

The National Committee for Citizens in Education is a non-profit, tax-exempt membership organization dedicated to increasing citizen involvement in the affairs of the nation's public schools. NCCE is a successor to the National Committee for Support of the Public Schools founded in 1962 by Agnes Meyer, Harry Truman and others. The original organization concentrated on increased federal assistance to public education and was highly successful in that timely effort. In 1973 the Committee was reorganized, took its new name and reconstituted its purpose. Since then the NCCE has:

- Published a major report, *Children, Parents and School Records*, which received national attention in Parade Magazine, Time Magazine, The New York Times and on ABC Television.
- Supplied necessary information upon request to Senator James Buckley, who sponsored the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974.
- Conducted hearings across the United States on who controls America's public schools, taking testimony from hundreds of individuals and organizations.
- Went to court to challenge the authority of the federal government to restrict non-profit, tax exempt organizations from attempting to influence legislation (lost) and to assert the due process rights of students (won in the United States Supreme Court).
- Joined with other national organizations to convene a National Conference of Title I Parents.
- Produced a manual to help parents determine whether textbooks and other materials are appropriate for their children.
- Established the first public-interest, toll-free telephone hotline, 800-NET-WORK, to help parents get rapid information and help.
- Established *The Parents' Network*, to mobilize citizens for action to improve our nation's public schools, and to support existing local parent-citizen groups.
- Established the Citizens Training Institute to train parents and citizens in the important and practical ways to work more effectively in schools.

THE PARENTS' NETWORK

Local and statewide citizen-parent groups can work with NCCE by joining *The Parents' Network*.

Membership—Participating groups automatically receive all names of callers in their area from 800-NET-WORK, NCCE's nationwide toll-free telephone hotline. By dialing 800-NET-WORK parents and citizens anywhere in the continental United States (except in Maryland) can get information about *The Parents' Network*.

Research—With the help of the *Parents' Network*, NCCE prepares and distributes materials to help parents. NCCE's first handbook, *Children, Parents and School Records*, has already helped thousands of parents and citizens.

Information—NCCE is publishing a joint newspaper with *The Parents' Network*, called NET-WORK, featuring news of local groups and exchanging information.

The cost for group affiliation ranges from $15–$50 per year, depending upon the size of the local group and pro-rated at 10¢ per paying member.

For Parents' Network groups nearest you call or write us.

SERVICES OF NCCE AND THE PARENTS' NETWORK

- Referral: Concerned parents to legal counsel; organizations to other organizations; individuals to organizations; parent groups to appropriate educators; legislative inquiries to appropriate sources of information.
- Material: Produce manuals, pamphlets and research documents useful to citizens in dealing with their schools and useful to parents in understanding the educational system.
- Research: Prepare background information for the press and for legislators who request it.
- Public information: Clarify school issues and provide information to the national press.
- Representation: Act as a national clearinghouse and when asked will on occasion speak in behalf of local parent organizations.
- Legal: Join as a "friend of the court" in lawsuits that have national consequences for the rights of students and parents.
- Service to individuals: Support services to groups and individuals to establish new organizations in cities where no parent-citizen voice currently is heard.
- Training for parents and citizens in the important and practical ways to work more effectively in schools.

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PUBLICATIONS OF NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CITIZENS IN EDUCATION

PARENTS ORGANIZING TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS—Step by step guide to organizing and running a parent group in your children's school that can act effectively to upgrade the quality of education and the educational environment.—(*52 pages;* **$1.50**—*single copy free to members.)*

PUBLIC TESTIMONY ON PUBLIC SCHOOLS—The focus is on citizens, whose frustration with the school system has grown especially deep; teachers, whose organizational strength and bargaining power is gaining rapidly; state legislators, who are increasingly abandoning a reactive posture in favor of a more assertive role in decisions affecting education. Testimony in five major cities was taken from individuals and organizations, representing a cross-section of educators, legislators, students, parents and others concerned with the public schools. McCutchan Publishing Corporation—(*paperback, 271 pages,* **$5.00**—*reduced cost of $3 to members.*)

VIOLENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS: WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT IT—WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT—The booklet includes regional surveys of school crime; do's and don'ts for children's safety; recent Supreme Court decisions on student rights, state legislation dealing with the problem; alternatives in public education; how to conduct a survey to determine the level of security the community will support and sources of additional help and information.—(*52 pages;* **$1.00**—*single copy free to members.*)

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION: CHALLENGES TO STATE BOARD LEADERSHIP—The shifting centers of power and responsibility in American education and their consequences for state politics in education.—(*94 pages;* **$3.50**—*single copy free to members.*)

FITS AND MISFITS: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S LEARNING MATERIALS—Booklet produced in cooperation with The Educational Products Information Exchange. Contains answers to some questions about the selection of materials used in the schools, i.e. Who chooses those materials? On what basis? Through what procedures?—(*17 pages*—**$1.25**—*single copy free to members.*)

CHILDREN, PARENTS AND SCHOOL RECORDS—Guide to aid all persons, especially parents concerned with the privacy of school records. Contains current state practices and how to correct abuses.—(*Out of Print*)

DISCOUNTS AVAILABLE ON 10 OR MORE COPIES

NETWORK—A national school-year newspaper for parents. (*Free to members, subscriptions* **$8.00 a year.**)

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—(JWR)